

**Senator Bernard Sanders**  
**Chairman, U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs**  
**The American Legion National Convention**  
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Thank you, Commander Dellinger, for inviting me to be with you today, and thank you for all your hard work over this last year.

I would also like to thank each and every member of the Legion here today for your service to our country. It is an honor to be here among so many of our nation's heroes.

As the largest veterans' service organization in the nation, the American Legion plays an enormously important role in a number of areas. Your staff and volunteers do a great job assisting veterans all across the country with disability claims, job searches, and educational needs.

In Washington, your organization does outstanding work with the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs on legislation, and in keeping them informed about the needs and priorities of the veterans community.

Further, in addition to all that you do for America's veterans and their families, I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge the work you do for our young people through your Girls and Boys State programs, your scholarship programs, and the various clubs and athletics programs you offer. At a time when too many kids are hanging out on street corners with nothing to do, your efforts are much appreciated. I would much prefer seeing kids playing baseball or basketball than doing drugs or crime, and your programs very much help in that regard.

I have been Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee for only 18 months but, during that period, I have learned one very important lesson. And that is that the cost of war is much greater than most Americans perceive, and that the cost of war does not end when the last shots are fired and the last missiles are launched. Let us be very clear: taking care of veterans is as much a cost of war as guns, tanks and planes. The cost of war continues until the last veteran, and it could be 70 or 80 years after his/her service, receives all of the care and benefits that he or she has earned.

And I have a simple message for those in Washington who claim that taking care of veterans is just too expensive. If you are not prepared to provide the health care and other benefits that veterans have earned, then don't send them off to war in the first place. Taking care of veterans is a cost of war.

Here is a simple political truth. It is easy for politicians to give great and heartfelt speeches praising veterans on Memorial Day, Veterans Day and other occasions. And all of that is extremely important. But here is what is even more important. And that is to make sure that

when these men and women come home from war they get all of the benefits that they earned. We cannot turn our backs on veterans in need.

We are all familiar with the enormous sacrifices made by the men and women who fought in World War II, Korea, Vietnam and other conflicts. Let me just, for a moment, touch upon the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - and the true cost of those wars.

- Almost 7,000 brave men and women lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan – 7,000 soldiers who never returned. And that is the deepest cost of war.
- The cost of war is some 500,000 men and women coming home from these wars with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or a traumatic brain injury.
- The cost of war is the many service-members coming home without legs, arms, eyesight, or hearing.
- The cost of war is a tragically high rate of suicide among the men and women who served in these wars.
- The cost of war is too many veterans returning home from the wars unable to find jobs and unable to get their feet back on the ground financially.
- The cost of war is high divorce rates and the impact that family stress has on the lives of children.
- The cost of war is young widows and widowers having to rebuild their lives again without their spouse.

These are some of the true costs of war, costs which are felt by veterans and their families every single day, year after year after year. And if we as a nation stand for anything we cannot turn our backs on the men and women who defended us.

As many of you know, Congress accomplished something significant and something that does not happen very often these days. We passed legislation. The House and Senate voted in overwhelming, bi-partisan numbers to pass, and President Obama signed into law, the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014. This was a true bi-partisan effort and I enjoyed working with Congressman Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Veterans committee to make it happen.

In my view this important legislation begins, in some very significant ways, to address major issues facing the veterans' community and the VA. It is a good beginning but, in my view, we still have a long way to go. Before I get to the key provisions in that legislation, let me touch upon some other measures that the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee worked on successfully – that you might not be aware of.

Over the last number of years there has been a lot of discussion in Washington, on Wall Street

and in corporate think-tanks about the need to enact so-called “entitlement reform.”

What you should understand is that when people talk about “entitlement reform” what they really mean, in English, is cutting Social Security, cutting Medicare and cutting Medicaid. That’s what they are really talking about. The cuts to Social Security benefits were going to come in the form of a so-called Chained CPI – which would have meant significant cuts in the COLAs that seniors received, that people with disabilities received and, if you can believe it, that disabled veterans received.

Moving to a chained CPI would have cut the benefits of more than 3.7 million disabled veterans. Veterans who started receiving disability benefits at age 30 would have seen their benefits cut by over \$1,400 a year by the time they reach 45, and on their 65th birthday, their benefits would have been cut by more than \$3,200.

Moving to a chained CPI would also cut the benefits of more than 350,000 surviving spouses and children of those who have lost a loved one. These are benefits that average a mere \$15,000 a year.

I am very happy to tell you that working with virtually every veterans organization in the country, and the American Legion played a leading role, working with senior groups, trade unions, disability groups and women’s groups we turned back that horrendous proposal. The bottom line is that at a time when the wealthiest people in this country and the largest corporations are doing phenomenally well, and enjoy many, many tax breaks, we do not balance the budget on the backs of some of the most vulnerable people in this country – including disabled veterans.

Further, as many of you know, for a number of years the VA used a “round-down” when it sent out monthly checks to disabled veterans. Under this approach, when a cost-of-living adjustment was applied to disability benefits, the adjusted amount was rounded down to the next whole dollar whether it was five cents or 99 cents. We should not be nickel and dining disabled vets. I’m happy to tell you that we ended that practice.

Let me now take a moment to touch on the key provisions of the recently passed Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 - one of the more significant pieces of veterans legislation passed in recent years.

The simple fact is that, tragically, too many veterans in too many facilities across this country were placed on waiting lists that were much, much too long. In some cases, those waiting lists were manipulated or doctored so that the real length of time veterans waited for care was hidden. Needless to say, that type of activity is abhorrent and is in violation of everything that the VA is supposed to represent. In my view, those people engaged in these dishonest activities must be held accountable and punished.

I am happy to tell you that the law we just passed will go a long way to address these issues and to ensure veterans receive the timely and quality health care they have earned and deserve. At a time when millions of new veterans have come into the VA system in recent years, that is exactly what we should be doing.

This law invests a significant sum of money – 10 billion dollars – to make sure that we end these long waiting lists. If the VA cannot provide care in a reasonable period of time, eligible veterans will be able to get their care outside of the VA.

Further, this legislation addresses a long-standing problem. There are some veterans in this country, especially in rural states, who live hundreds of miles from a VA facility. This legislation, under a 3 year trial period, will enable veterans who reside more than 40 miles from their nearest VA medical facility to receive care from non-Department providers including private practitioners, Community health centers, Department of Defense facilities and the Indian Health Service.

This law also addresses the very serious problem of accountability. The Secretary now has the authority to immediately remove incompetent senior executives based on poor job performance or misconduct.

If our goal is to make sure that we have a strong and robust VA that can provide quality care in a timely manner to all eligible veterans, we have to get at the root cause of the access issues. This is especially true at a time when millions of new veterans have come into the VA system in recent years, and when an aging veterans population requires extensive care.

The simple truth is that, in many parts of the country, the VA needs more doctors, the VA needs more nurses, the VA needs more mental health providers. Further, in certain parts of this country, the VA needs more space for a growing patient population. That is the reality.

Does VA need better management? You bet it does. Does it need to be more efficient, more accountable? Absolutely. But at the end of the day, if you do not have the doctors and the nurses and the medical staff you need, there will continue to be unacceptably long waiting lines and veterans will not get the care they need in a timely manner.

In order to address this crisis, this legislation provides the Department with 5 billion dollars to strengthen its internal capacity through the hiring of new doctors, nurses, and other clinical staff. This bill also provides \$1.5 billion for the VA to enter into 27 major medical facility leases in 18 states and Puerto Rico. In many instances, these leases will improve access to care closer to home, and will increase the availability of specialty care services in these locations.

Will all of this be enough to solve all of VA's problems? Frankly, I doubt it, but it's certainly a step forward.

Finally, this law addresses some other very important issues facing veterans and their families.

Until this legislation was passed, wives of soldiers who lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan were not eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Educational bill. That was wrong and this bill remedied that situation.

- It calls for schools receiving GI Bill payments from VA to offer recently separated

servicemembers the in-state tuition rate. This will make it possible for more veterans to get a higher education.

- This law addresses the scourge of military sexual trauma and helps in healing veterans' and their families' invisible wounds by improving access to VA mental health services.
- Finally, this legislation provides continued authority for VA to provide rehabilitation, quality of life and community integration services to veterans with severe traumatic brain injuries.

The problems within VA were not created overnight, and we know that they will not be solved overnight. Though significant, this compromise legislation cannot be relied upon to solve all of VA's problems. There is much left to do and I have no doubt The American Legion will continue to play a critical role in addressing VA's problems.

However, let us not forget that – today alone – some 230,000 veterans are walking in the door of a VA facility for health care. And the overwhelming majority – well over 90% of them – believe they receive high-quality care. In a letter sent to the House and Senate veterans' committees on June 17th which was signed by virtually every major veterans' group – including The American Legion, the groups wrote:

“PROTECT AND PRESERVE THE VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM - Any legislative, regulatory or administrative changes designed to respond to the VA health access crisis, whether temporary or permanent, must protect, preserve and strengthen the VA health care system so that it remains capable of providing a full continuum of high-quality, timely health care to all enrolled veterans...” The letter continues, quote, “unless the legislation simultaneously sets VA on a path to intelligently strengthen health care delivery, expand access and capacity, reallocate resources and ensure that overall VA funding matches its mission, the current problems confronting VA and veterans will inevitably recur.” End of quote.

Congress took the first step in protecting and preserving VA's health care system with passage of this compromise legislation. But there is more work to be done.

The simple truth, however, is not everyone agrees with these positions. There are people who do not like Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid and would cut these programs today, tomorrow and the next day if they had their way. There are those that do not like the idea of the government providing good health care to millions of Americans. These same people would privatize the VA health care system. I strongly disagree with that position.

Over and over again, I hear from Vermont veterans and veterans across the country that once they get into the system the care is good. That's not just my view. It is the view of virtually all of the major veterans' organizations and independent studies that compare VA care with care in the private sector. We owe it to these veterans to fix the current problems and bolster the system to ensure this quality care is available to them for the years and decades to come.

What I also hear from veterans is that they feel much more comfortable walking into a VA facility. VA excels at providing the specialized care seriously injured veterans need. When a

veteran walks into a VA facility, they find themselves surrounded by former comrades – men and women who have shared similar life experiences – and in many cases friends.

I firmly believe VA provides quality health care to millions of veterans all across this country. I will never stop fighting to protect and preserve VA's health care system. I look forward to continuing to work with the President, Secretary McDonald and my House and Senate colleagues to make that happen.

In the last few weeks, we have made some significant progress. While this recent legislation is a significant step forward, we still have a long way to go. There are other issues that must be addressed:

VA's Caregiver Program has provided critical resources and services that have allowed seriously injured post-9/11 veterans to live at home in the care of their loved ones. These benefits include access to training, respite care, transportation services, a monthly stipend and – for some – access to VA health care. But there are Caregivers all across this country who for years have been providing love and support to seriously injured veterans of the Korean Conflict or the Vietnam War who are not currently eligible for this program. Congress should put an end to this discrepancy and expand VA's Caregiver Program to all generations of veterans and their families.

Up to 22 veterans per day commit suicide. Even one veteran suicide is one too many. Veterans must have access to timely, high-quality mental health services, and I vow to continue fighting to ensure that our veterans receive just that.

- Extend from five to ten years unfettered access to VA health care for recently separated veterans.

Both of these provisions would go a long way towards helping veterans address their mental health needs and towards slowing the all too high rate of suicide among veterans.

Lack of access to dental services has pervasive and expensive repercussions throughout society:

- Americans spend over \$100 billion on dental care services each year, a third of these expenditures are paid out-of-pocket.
- Poor dental health affects the ability of members of the National Guard and Reserve – who may not have access to dental care – to deploy, having a negative impact on military readiness.
- Poor dental health can also exacerbate existing health problems like diabetes and heart disease.

For these reasons, we need to expand access to VA dental care, in a cost-effective and equitable way.

The widespread use of improvised explosive devices throughout Iraq and Afghanistan has left over 2,300 veterans with injuries that prevent them from starting a family. We can and should

provide them with the help they need to recognize their dreams of starting a family.

These are just some of the issues that remain to be addresses. I know some of the efforts I mentioned have the strong support of numerous veterans and military service organizations in the country including The American Legion. I thank you for your tireless support. I will continue to fight for these priorities and the improvements they would make in the lives of our nation's heroes.

Finally, I would ask for your help. Despite the problems we have seen over the last several months, I believe the vast majority of VA's employees are honest hard working people. In fact, many are veterans just like you who proudly continue to serve.

I would ask The American Legion to let the American people know about the good things that the over 300,000 employees at VA do for America's veterans every day. We have heard so much about the areas that need to be improved – and we are working hard to address those issues - but each day VA's dedicated workforce:

- Provides good health care to hundreds of thousands of veterans and advances medical research that will benefit not just veterans but our entire nation.
- Provides financial assistance to hundreds of thousands of low-income veterans and survivors;
- Gives support to the caregivers of those most seriously injured in the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan; and
- Ensures our Nation's heroes are buried with the dignity and respect they deserve.

These aren't the stories we hear about, but each and every day across this country, there are good things happening at VA, and I challenge you to share these stories as we continue to work together to rebuild the Department – a VA we can all be proud of as it carries out its mission of providing America's veterans with the care and benefits they have earned.